



# Montana Forests in Focus Initiative

*Implementation Update  
January 2015*

<http://dnrc.mt.gov/forestry/forestsinfocus.asp>

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## Subject: USFS-DNRC Liaison Position

### Background:

In November 2014, DNRC hired a USFS-DNRC Liaison to represent the state's interests in the management of national forests and the implementation of federal forest policy in the state. Duties include:

- Coordinate state involvement on USFS Stewardship projects, pursuant to the Master Stewardship Agreement,
- Ensure implementation of projects within 2014 Farm Bill Priority Landscapes;
- Develop a state investment plan for USFS lands to improve forest resiliency and economic benefits.
- Work with collaborative groups, local government, and strategic partners to ensure diverse interests are represented when DNRC engages in USFS projects.
- Identify opportunities for state intervention in lawsuits on USFS projects.
- Explore other methods to engage the USFS to increase pace and scale of forest restoration.

## Federal Forest Engagement—2014/15 Accomplishments:

### 2014 Farm Bill

Under authority granted within the 2014 Farm Bill, Governor Bullock nominated nearly five million acres of national forest system lands for designation as priority landscapes at risk of declining forest health or for wildfires. Of these, 4.97 million acres were accepted by the Secretary of Agriculture for designation. The designation as priority landscapes provides several important tools to accelerate planning and implementation of forest restoration projects. *The USFS-DNRC Liaison* will work to ensure the continued implementation of projects in these areas.

### State Investment in USFS projects

*The USFS-DNRC Liaison* is currently coordinating the investment of one million dollars in USFS projects which meet criteria in the Forests in Focus Initiative:

- DNRC received almost \$2 million in funding requests.
- Twenty project proposals were received, with at least one from each national forest in Montana.
- Eleven Montana counties will be positively impacted by the projects receiving state investments.
- All of the projects are in the 2014 Farm Bill Priority Landscape designations; each has important restoration outcomes, collaborative involvement and commercial timber outputs.
- Seven of the projects will utilize one of the Farm Bill authorities to expedite the planning process.
- State investments will help ensure earlier project implementation.
- Two collaborative groups will receive state funding to work on specific USFS projects.
- Private partners are interested in investing funds on several of these projects.

## **Chessman Reservoir Project – DNRC/USFS Partnership**

Under a Master Stewardship Agreement with the U.S. Forest Service, DNRC and Helena National Forest are implementing the Red Mountain Flume/Chessman Reservoir Project, which will reduce fuels and improve forest health in Helena’s municipal watershed. DNRC is administering the project contract with RY-Timber of Townsend, MT.

DNRC, the Montana Attorney General’s office, and the City of Helena filed an amicus brief in support of the project when legal challenges threatened to delay or permanently stop the project. DNRC involvement with the legal challenge was essential in the favorable court decision.

*The USFS-DNRC Liaison* is conducting an assessment on the lessons learned in this project, to determine the efficacy of DNRC entering into additional stewardship projects with the USFS.

## **Good Neighbor Authority**

*The USFS-DNRC Liaison* is exploring the best way to utilize the Good Neighbor Authority (GNA) approved by Congress in the 2014 Farm Bill. GNA has potential to provide a new, flexible management tool to enable Montana and federal partners to collaborate more closely in carrying out critical forest, rangeland, and watershed restoration activities, and fuels reduction projects.

## **Building Collaborative Capacity**

In October 2014, Governor Bullock met with representatives of collaborative groups involved in federal forest management to discuss the Farm Bill, Forests in Focus Initiative, and the critical role collaborative processes play in determining the future of federal forest management in Montana. Those in attendance expressed the need to accelerate forest restoration on national forests in Montana, and expressed their commitment to seek collaborative solutions to meet that goal. Another meeting is planned for spring 2015.

*The USFS-DNRC Liaison* continues to meet with forest based collaborative groups, county commissioners and others to foster the partnerships essential to advance forest restoration on national forests in Montana.

## **Summary:**

*Significant progress has been made in the past year on state engagement with the US Forest Service; much of that occurring since the hiring of the USFS Liaison position. Funding and authority for the FTE for this position is set to be eliminated as a part of the DNRC FTE reduction required by HB2 language from the 2013 legislative session. Loss of this position would significantly reduce if not eliminate proactive state engagement with the USFS.*